

Armed forces land at high schools

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Parents of juniors and seniors at Evanston Township High School were notified last week that the administration will release students' names and other personal information to military recruiters unless they receive a parental request to the contrary.

New revisions to federal law require high schools that receive federal funds to provide military recruiters, on request, with the names, addresses and telephone numbers of juniors and seniors.

Furthermore, the laws require that schools provide recruiters with the same, on-campus access to students that they afford college representatives and prospective employers.

Schools that fail to comply with the recruiter-access provision face a cutoff of federal education funding.

The new mandates were written into the sweeping education reform bill known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the National Defense Reauthorization Act for fiscal 2002.

'No Child Left Behind'

Disturbed by reports that recruiters were being barred from some high school campuses, the mandate was inserted into the No Child Left Behind Act by an amendment introduced by U.S. Reps. David Vitter, R-La., and Pete Sessions, R-Texas. Vitter was quoted in news reports as saying the practice of excluding recruiters "demonstrated an anti-military attitude" that he found offensive.

The Vitter-Sessions Amendment passed the U.S. House 366-57, with U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, voting against it and U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, voting in favor.

Federal law also requires that parents be notified of the school's intention to release the information and be given an opportunity to opt out.

Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, parents can request that their students' information not be released to third parties, including college representatives and military recruiters.

Opt-out deadline

In a mailing that went out Jan. 15, ETHS administrators notified parents of the requirements and offered them the opportunity to submit written requests by Jan. 24 that the information be withheld.

Said Assistant Superintendent Denise Martin, "We also included a disclaimer that since the (armed services) are a government agency, the ... information is available through Social Security numbers or other sources.

"It's possible the military could obtain the information and it wouldn't be coming from us."

On Tuesday, administrators announced the deadline was being extended to Feb. 28.

ETHS parent Dickelle Fonda was dismayed that parents initially were given so little time to respond.

"The letter didn't stop me in my tracks," said Fonda, a draft counselor for the American Friends Service Committee who requested last fall that her son's name not be given to military recruiters. "But for busy parents, that's very little time."

ETHS first notified parents of the new requirements in the November-December issue of the school's parent newsletter. According to Kathy Miehl, director of public information, the school received only nine written requests for omission from parents or guardians in response to the newsletter item.

Martin said she expects that in future years, parental notification will be incorporated into the registration process prior to the start of the school year.

That's worrisome for Fonda, who fears the information could be overlooked amid the many other papers and forms.

"I think there are bugs to be worked out and I want to work with the school on this," said Fonda, who plans to suggest the school institute "opt-in" procedures rather than requiring parents to opt out.

"It makes children far too vulnerable to having their privacy rights violated," said Fonda, who believes there will be legal challenges to the requirement.

Evanston Township High School has not maintained a student directory and has not previously

supplied names, addresses and telephone numbers to colleges, employers or anyone else requesting the information.

Law tied to funding

The new mandate, however, "was not something we could opt out of," Martin noted. The school receives \$1.9 million annually, or 3.4 percent of its total budget, from the federal government.

High school administrators were notified of the requirements and regulations last fall in a joint letter sent over the signatures of U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige and U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The letter noted that cooperation from schools is vital to sustaining the all-volunteer U.S. Armed Forces, which has been in existence for the past 25 years.

"Providing this information is consistent with the Family Educational Rights Privacy Act, which protects the privacy of student education records," assured the two members of President George W. Bush's Cabinet.

"Student directory information will be used specifically for armed services recruiting purposes, and for informing young people of scholarship opportunities. For some of our students, this may be the best opportunity they have to get a college education."

Boon to recruiters

U.S. Marine Capt. Peter Titterton, who supervises a military recruiting territory that includes 350 high schools from northern Indiana to the Wisconsin border, said the new federal requirement has been a boon to recruiters who visit high schools periodically to meet with students.

"We are not looking to butt heads with any schools," Titterton said. "We are just here to help their students take another career path. There are very few schools where everyone goes to college."

Titterton said that in past years, recruiters sometimes encountered resistance when they arrived at some schools and asked for lists of students.

"Now many of them have it waiting for the recruiters when they arrive," Titterton said. "In the past, we've gotten lists of students from about 65 percent of the schools. Since the new requirement went into effect, it's been 85 percent."

Particularly helpful has been having the weight of the U.S. Department of Education behind the effort, Titterton said.

"This is the first time the U.S. Secretary of Defense and the U.S. Secretary of Education have been operating off the same page of music," Titterton said.

As a Defense Department measure, "there was no way to enforce it; it was just coming down the military chain of command," the recruiter said. "Now with the No Child Left Behind Act, it is coming down the education chain of command as well."

Titterton contended the measure is beneficial to the schools and many students, for whom the military offers the best chance to obtain post-secondary education.